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REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL CONCERNING THE SITUATION IN ABKHAZIA, GEORGIA

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted in pursuance of resolution 1096 (1997) of 30 January 1997, in which the Security Council decided to extend the mandate of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) for a new period, terminating on 31 July 1997, and requested me to continue to keep the Council regularly informed and to report after three months from the date of the adoption of the resolution on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia, including on the operations of UNOMIG, and to provide recommendations in that report on the nature of the United Nations presence. The present report provides an update of the situation as at mid-April 1997.

II. POLITICAL ASPECTS

2. The absence of progress in the settlement of the Georgian/Abkhaz conflict, including the problem of the refugees and internally displaced persons, has created widespread dissatisfaction among the Georgian population and the country's leadership is being increasingly urged to take decisive action to resolve the conflict. This mood was clearly conveyed to me by the Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia, Mr. Zurab Zhvania, with whom I met on 13 March 1997 in New York. From 2 to 21 March, 10 deputies of the "Abkhazeti" faction in the Georgian Parliament staged a hunger strike in Tbilisi, demanding the withdrawal of the peacekeeping force of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) from Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

3. The serious economic and social problems in Abkhazia have been exacerbated by the region's isolation from the international community. In particular, the decision on measures to settle the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia, adopted by the Council of Heads of State of CIS on 19 January 1996 (see A/51/62-S/1996/74, annex IV), has created additional hardship. This situation has generated frustration among the population and has increased pressure on the leadership to solve these problems.

4. Bilateral contacts between the two sides have continued. There have been several contacts by telephone between the President of Georgia, Mr. Eduard Shevardnadze, and the Abkhaz leader, Mr. Vladislav Ardzinba, who have agreed to establish a joint/bilateral commission chaired by senior representatives from both sides. Bilateral contacts at the working level have also taken place, most notably a meeting in early March in the Gali region between senior officials responsible for energy problems. Issues addressed during that meeting included the Hydroelectric Power Station at Inguri-GES.

5. In addition to bilateral contacts, consultations with the two sides were conducted by the Russian Federation in early February to spell out the goals of the negotiations and to decide on the machinery for the comprehensive settlement of the conflict. The talks focused on the draft text of a declaration, proposed by the Russian Federation, on the principles for a settlement and confidence-building measures between the parties to the Georgian/Abkhaz conflict.

6. In mid-February, the Ministries of Communication of Georgia and the Russian Federation signed an agreement on communications systems according to which all external telephone communications to and from Sukhumi should be routed through Tbilisi, instead of through the territory of the Russian Federation. The agreement has been protested against by the Abkhaz leadership, which has threatened to end all contacts with the Georgian side if the status quo ante is not restored.

7. At the meeting of the Council of Heads of State of CIS, held in Moscow on 28 March, it was decided that States members should endeavour to reach, as soon as possible, a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia, and an agreement on the return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes. The meeting also called for the implementation and monitoring of the decision on the conflict adopted on 19 January 1996 and gave full support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders (see S/1997/268, annex II).

8. During the reporting period, representatives of a number of European organizations visited Georgia, including Abkhazia. In mid-March, the Vice-President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Special Rapporteur on the situation in Abkhazia, Mr. Wojciech Lamentowicz, visited Tbilisi and Sukhumi. In late March, a delegation of the Committee on Relations with European Non-Member Countries of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe visited Georgia. Also in late March, a delegation of the European Union (EU) visited Inguri-GES to review the assistance required to rehabilitate the dam and the hydroelectric power station.

9. A number of non-governmental organizations and research institutions in Austria, the Russian Federation and the United States of America, among others, have brought together Georgian and Abkhaz individuals to discuss problems of common interest, with a view to facilitating progress towards the political settlement of the conflict.

10. Throughout the reporting period, the members of the group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Georgia maintained contact collectively and individually

with the parties to the conflict and with my representatives at Headquarters and in the field. The Governments concerned have indicated their willingness to support renewed United Nations efforts in the peace process.

11. As set out in my previous report (S/1997/47), I have started to explore possible ways to revive the role of the United Nations in the Georgian/Abkhaz peace process. To this effect, I had consultations with my Special Envoy, Ambassador Edouard Brunner, as well as with his Deputy, Mr. Liviu Bota, in New York on 13 March and 2 April, respectively. I have also pursued the question of modalities of cooperation between the United Nations and the Russian Federation, in its capacity as facilitator in the Georgian/Abkhaz peace process. In this context, Ambassador-at-large Lev Mironov of the Russian Federation visited Headquarters on 7 and 8 April for consultations.

III. HUMANITARIAN SITUATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

12. The humanitarian situation in Abkhazia, Georgia, continues to be difficult. United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Volunteers programme, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Action contre la faim and Médecins sans frontières, are implementing humanitarian programmes in Abkhazia and in other parts of Georgia. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs coordinates their activities in the region through its office in Sukhumi. These organizations and agencies have continued their efforts to address the most pressing needs of the population of Abkhazia and have been providing food and medicine to the most vulnerable sectors of the population. In addition, they are engaged in activities such as emergency repair of houses and distribution of agricultural products. They have also undertaken confidence-building measures by bringing together non-governmental organizations from Tbilisi and Sukhumi.

13. Mines continue to prevent humanitarian organizations from operating freely in the Gali sector and to threaten civilian activities in the Gumista River area, north of Sukhumi, and parts of the Kodori Valley. The spontaneous return of internally displaced persons to the Gali sector that took place in 1995 and parts of 1996 has subsided, except for some villages in the south-western part of the sector where UNHCR has recently started to provide agricultural assistance. In addition, aid agencies are pursuing their contingency planning in order to support the return of refugees and displaced persons once the process resumes (see S/1997/47, para. 14).

14. Humanitarian agencies require additional voluntary contributions to continue their activities. In the Zugdidi area, funding for certain humanitarian aid programmes ended on 1 April and, as a result, non-governmental organizations ceased the distribution of food and medicine in the area. However, these organizations will maintain offices in Zugdidi in order to continue other relief programmes.

15. The recently established United Nations office for the protection and promotion of human rights in Abkhazia has begun its work and the Abkhaz authorities have shown readiness to work with it. The establishment of the

office has already produced some promising results, as reflected in the creation of a grass-roots organization for human rights and democracy in Abkhazia and in the establishment by the Abkhaz leader, Mr. Ardzinba, of a human rights commission within his administration to cooperate with the United Nations office.

16. In the initial phase, the head of the office, Ms. Elisabeth Stam, established contacts with representatives of the Government of Georgia and the Abkhaz authorities and with organizations concerned with human rights issues, including civic education. Translation into the Abkhaz language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights has been initiated. In addition, a basic but systematic monitoring of human rights violations has commenced, which focuses on compliance by the Abkhaz authorities with international human rights standards.

17. The United Nations and OSCE continue to hold consultations on the modalities of their cooperation regarding the human rights office.

IV. OPERATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA

18. During the reporting period, UNOMIG continued to operate in the security and restricted weapons zones of the Zugdidi sector and in the Kodori Valley. With regard to the Gali sector, the arrival of mine-protected and other vehicles and the resumption of resurfacing of those parts of the main roads which are judged to be especially vulnerable to mine-laying (see S/1997/47, para. 31) have restored the Mission's ability to patrol the sector and enabled it to reopen team bases in Zemo-Bargevi and Inguri-GES without unduly risking the lives of the military observers. Accordingly, the Mission now has three team bases in the Gali sector - at Zemo-Bargevi, Inguri-GES and Gali town. Patrols from those bases have established contacts with village mayors and other inhabitants so as to assist UNOMIG and the various United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations operating in the area in their work. It is the Chief Military Observer's assessment that UNOMIG is now implementing its mandate satisfactorily and will be able to implement it fully and under sufficiently secure conditions once mine-detection vehicles and related engineering support are deployed (see S/1996/507, para. 38). As Council members are aware (see S/1997/291 and 292), the Chief Military Observer, Major-General Per Källström (Sweden), is scheduled to complete his assignment on 30 April 1997. His successor, Major-General Harun-Ar-Rashid (Bangladesh), will assume his duties the following day.

19. One hundred and twenty-one military observers are currently deployed in the mission area (see annex). In this regard, it will be recalled that, in anticipation of the arrival of some 20 engineering support personnel who will undertake mine-detection and clearing, the Mission had planned gradually to reduce the number of its military observers to 116 (see S/1997/47, para. 16). However, following a thorough review of operational requirements and bearing in mind the remaining limitations on UNOMIG patrolling, the Chief Military Observer has advised me that a total of 106 observers should be sufficient to enable UNOMIG to carry out the tasks entrusted to it under resolution 937 (1994) of

21 July 1994. This number, together with the 20 engineers whose presence continues to be necessitated by the mine problem, would thus bring the strength of the Mission to 126.

20. The Kodori Valley team base at Azhara, which was closed for the winter on 29 November 1996 (ibid., para. 18), should be reopened shortly. However, reopening will have to wait until a section of the road leading to the team base, which was rendered impassable by a landslide, is cleared and reopened to traffic. In the meantime, UNOMIG has been meeting with the CIS peacekeeping force and the Abkhaz army at their checkpoints in the lower Kodori Valley. Meetings have also been arranged on occasion with representatives of the Svanetian community.

21. As mentioned in my previous report (see S/1997/47, para. 19), representatives of the police, militia and security services from both sides are now included in the weekly quadripartite meetings chaired by the Commander of the CIS peacekeeping force and attended by the Chief Military Observer and the local representatives of the Georgian and Abkhaz administrations. Although these meetings continued to enable the parties to discuss security and humanitarian issues, they were suspended for two weeks in February by the Abkhaz side to press for the release of two of their soldiers abducted in the restricted weapons zone on 14 November 1996 (ibid., para. 24). The meetings resumed subsequently after the soldiers were returned. The weekly police meeting, which enables the head of the Gali militia and the Chief of the Zugdidi police to discuss security matters and exchange information (ibid., para. 19), remains suspended owing to the absence of representatives from the Abkhaz militia.

22. UNOMIG continues to cooperate with United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations working on both sides of the Inguri River. The Mission's medical teams have again provided first aid to CIS peacekeeping force personnel and members of the local population and have assisted with medical evacuations.

V. SITUATION ON THE GROUND

A. General

23. The situation in the Gali restricted weapons zone and, in particular, the security zone, remains unsettled and tense. Acts of violence, including common crime, continued during the reporting period and even increased during the first weeks of April. The most serious such incident was the direct targeting of the CIS peacekeeping force by unknown persons, resulting in the tragic death of three members of the force. In addition, 10 members of the force were injured in four separate incidents in which the force itself appeared to be the primary target.

24. Stability in the security and restricted weapons zones of the Gali sector was severely affected by a rise in the crime rate during the winter period - reportedly the coldest in many years - which saw numerous acts of looting and armed robbery. Instability was exacerbated during the period by the continuing

inability of the Abkhaz militia to maintain law and order in the region despite a recent increase in its strength. Another contributing factor was the reaction of the CIS peacekeeping force to direct targeting, which prompted it to cease active patrolling from its checkpoints for two weeks. Patrolling has since resumed, although in a limited fashion.

25. In spite of vigorous efforts to increase the safety of the Mission's staff, including arrangements with the CIS peacekeeping force, systematic patrolling in groups of two vehicles and round-the-clock protection of the Mission's installations and assets, UNOMIG personnel and property were the victims of acts of robbery and theft on seven occasions during the reporting period on both sides of the Inguri River. The most serious incidents occurred on 12 February, when a local security guard employed by UNOMIG was beaten and robbed while on duty in Pitsunda and, on 13 February, when a UNOMIG vehicle was stopped and robbed at gunpoint by masked men on the M-27 road. Additionally, UNOMIG vehicles were broken into on three separate occasions and various pieces of equipment were stolen.

B. Security and restricted weapons zones

26. Several murders, attacks and looting incidents were reported in the security and restricted weapons zones during the period under review. The most serious incident was a mine attack on 22 February against an armoured personnel carrier of the CIS peacekeeping force, which was disabled by the explosion. A reinforced radio-controlled mine subsequently destroyed an ambulance travelling with two armoured personnel carriers of the CIS force, killing three medical personnel of the force. UNOMIG protested against this action to the authorities on both sides and demanded the cessation of all terrorist activities. The action was also condemned by the representatives of the Friends of the Secretary-General on Georgia in Tbilisi and by the Security Council. In another incident, on 23 March, two individuals were killed while placing a reinforced mine on a main road in the restricted weapons zone of the Gali sector. The equipment used by the mine-layers and their modus operandi indicate that they were highly professional and probably part of a well-organized group.

27. Both sides have generally complied with the Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces, signed in Moscow on 14 May 1994 (S/1994/583 and Corr.1, annex I), the relatively high number of violations notwithstanding. Since my last report, UNOMIG has reported 11 violations of the Agreement by the Abkhaz side and 56 by the Georgian side. Most of these were minor.

C. Kodori Valley

28. The situation in the Kodori Valley reportedly remained calm throughout the period covered by the present report, during which the UNOMIG team base was closed. The Georgian police are still present in the upper part of the valley, which obviously contributes to the improved situation. UNOMIG has continued to conduct periodic meetings with Svanetian representatives. The Mission's relations with the local representatives are excellent.

D. The mine problem

29. Mines continue to be a most serious problem in the Gali security and restricted weapons zones. No further incidents of indiscriminate use of mines on the M-27 road have been reported, but UNOMIG military observers continue to limit their movement and to wear protective clothing when transiting through the Gali sector.

30. The death of three members of the CIS peacekeeping force on 22 February has had a significant effect on the operations of the force. As mentioned above, some patrolling was suspended in February and March, leaving the region open to the activities of armed groups and common criminals. As a result, the threat of violence in the Gali sector remains high. A total of 10 mine explosions in seven separate incidents were reported during the period; on two occasions, reinforced multiple mines were used as one device.

31. Although UNOMIG has sometimes been targeted by bandits and common criminals, there is no indication that its personnel or equipment are the target of other armed groups operating in the area. On the other hand, there is little doubt that CIS peacekeeping force personnel, the Abkhaz militia and some local inhabitants have been targeted by the mine-layers.

32. Members of the Council will recall that, while awaiting a reply from a Government regarding the provision of mine-detection vehicles and support personnel, UNOMIG had developed an interim concept of operations that entailed the deployment of helicopter support. As described above (see para. 18), the problems faced by UNOMIG in the mission area are no longer as serious as they were. Resurfacing of the main roads, which was delayed significantly by the severe winter weather, has now resumed and mine-protected vehicles, along with other means of patrolling, have been deployed with success in the Gali sector. In addition, discussions with the Government, which has been asked to provide mine-detection vehicles, have been progressing. In view of that situation, it has been decided not to pursue the helicopter option.

VI. COOPERATION BETWEEN THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA AND THE COLLECTIVE PEACEKEEPING FORCES OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES

33. In accordance with its mandate, UNOMIG continues to observe the activities of the CIS peacekeeping force and to cooperate with it. Cooperation on the ground continued as described in my previous report (S/1997/47, para. 35). Cooperation between the two commanding officers has also been very good and has further improved mutual assistance and the sharing of information. This cooperation has had a positive effect on relations at the lower level.

34. At its meeting in Moscow on 28 March 1997, the Council of Heads of State of CIS decided to extend the mandate of the peacekeeping force until 31 July 1997 or until one of the parties to the conflict expressed its wish to terminate the operation. The Council further decided, with a view to the further expansion of the peacekeeping operation, the fullest implementation of the tasks arising from the mandate of the Collective Peacekeeping Forces and the additional provisions

to it, to consider it necessary to expand the security zone as provided for in the 14 May 1994 Agreement. In that regard, the Council instructed the command of the CIS peacekeeping force, "in cooperation with the parties, to prepare, within one month, a plan for redeploying the CIS peacekeeping force and other measures relating to the organized return of refugees and displaced persons to the Gali district" (see S/1997/268, annex I). The Chief Military Observer has advised me that the changes mentioned above do not affect the mandate of UNOMIG or its concept of operations.

VII. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS

35. The Government of Georgia continues to ensure coordination of donor activities with the assistance of various United Nations and other agencies and organizations. Statistical data confirm that Georgia has been successful in implementing its economic recovery programme. In 1996, inflation was reduced to 13.4 per cent and the National Bank's hard currency reserves were equal to two and a half months of the country's import needs. The national currency - the lari - continued to be stable and the country's gross domestic product increased by 11 per cent. However, Georgia continues to experience problems in the social sector, particularly in health and education. In view of the damaged economic environment, donor assistance has now shifted towards reconstruction and development, with pockets of humanitarian assistance in areas affected by conflict and in favour of internally displaced persons. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is advising the Government on policy and financial assistance for capacity-building in the economic and social sectors. The United Nations operational activities for development are coordinated by the UNDP Resident Coordinator.

VIII. OBSERVATIONS

36. Both parties to the conflict seem determined to continue their direct contacts and to broaden their bilateral relations. There is no better recipe for progress. It will also make it less likely that either side would seek again to resort to force to settle their respective grievances. I appeal to both sides to pursue, in this spirit, the current discussions over the implementation of the decisions of 28 March 1997 adopted by the CIS Council of Heads of State.

37. In consultations with the Russian Federation (see para. 11 above), reference was made to the support expressed by the Security Council for the Secretary-General's efforts towards a comprehensive settlement of the Georgian/Abkhaz conflict, with the assistance of the Russian Federation as facilitator.

38. The Russian Federation supports a strengthened United Nations involvement in the political process and agrees that future peacemaking efforts will be guided by a better exchange of information and improved coordination. The Russian Federation also favours the active involvement of the United Nations in social and economic areas, possibly through expert group meetings and

revitalizing the Coordinating Commission established in May 1994 (see S/1994/529, annex III).

39. In response to the increased demands arising from a strengthened United Nations involvement in the peacemaking process, I plan to appoint, as a successor to my current Special Envoy for Georgia, a resident Special Representative who will be based in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. I intend to convene a meeting with both sides at an appropriate location to map out the areas where concrete political progress can be made. In the meantime, I am instructing my Deputy Special Envoy, Mr. Bota, to consult the Russian authorities further on the proposal to revitalize the Coordinating Commission, which could serve as the umbrella for the establishment of expert groups on energy, transportation and communications. It is also my intention to strengthen the political element of UNOMIG, by deploying, throughout the mission area, a few additional officers specialized in political, civil and legal affairs. These adjustments will be made within the budgeted resources for the current financial year.

40. As reflected in the present report, mine-laying in the Gali sector has not abated, nor is there any indication that the situation in this regard is likely to improve in the near future. In view of this situation, I intend to continue to make every effort to build upon the positive results recently achieved with the arrival of the mine-protected vehicles and the resurfacing of the main roads in order to improve the safety of the military observers and the operational effectiveness of UNOMIG. The deployment of the mine-detection equipment and support personnel should contribute substantially to that end. However, I do not wish to conceal from the Council that, as in many other peacekeeping operations, the situation in the UNOMIG area continues to be dangerous and risks for the observers cannot be totally ruled out.

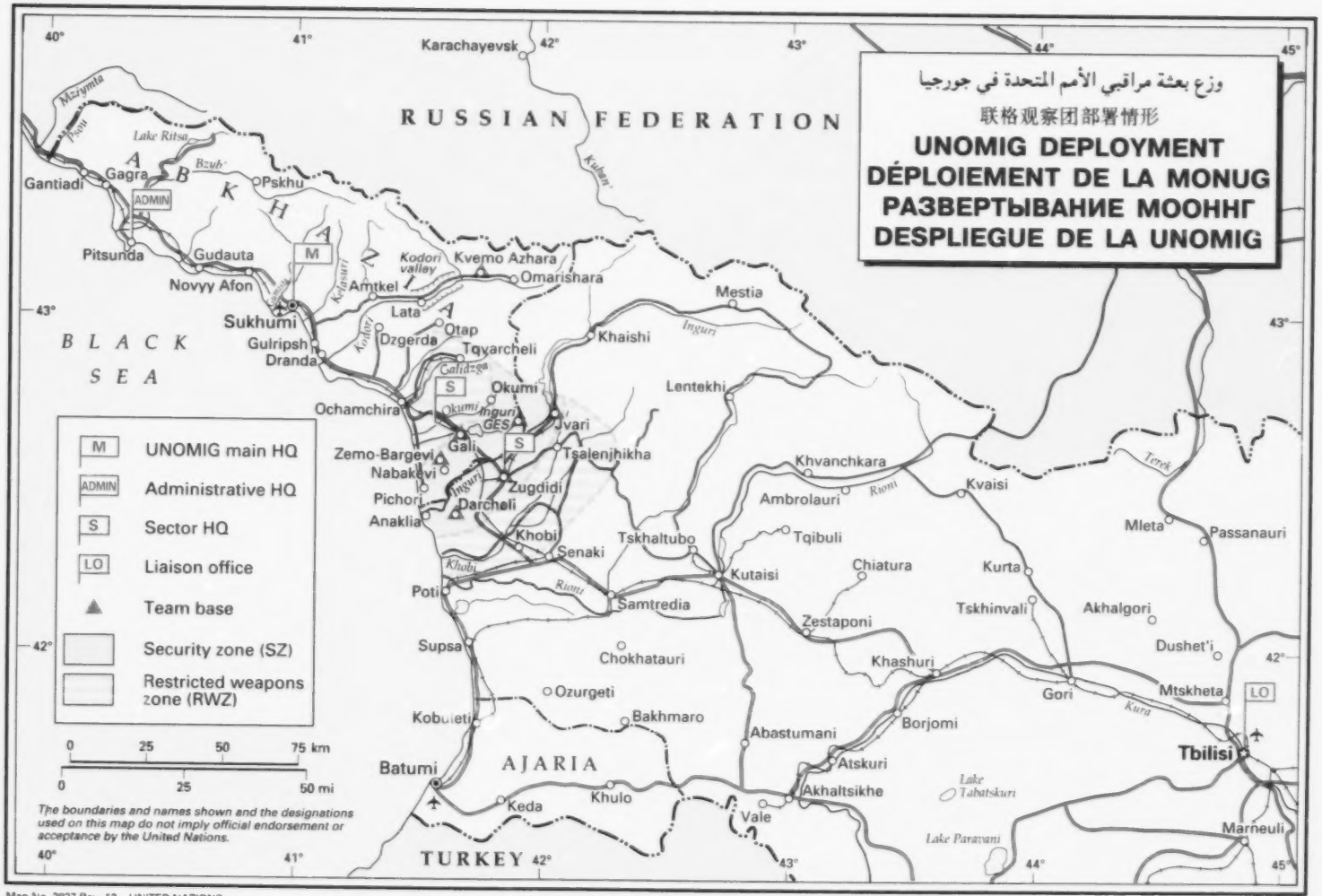
41. In conclusion, I should like to thank my Special Envoy, Ambassador Edouard Brunner, his Deputy and Head of Mission of UNOMIG, Mr. Liviu Bota, the Chief Military Observer, Major-General Per Källström, as well as the military and civilian personnel under their command, for their continued dedication and perseverance in carrying out, under difficult conditions, the tasks entrusted to them by the Security Council.

Annex

Composition of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia as at 8 April 1997

Country	Military observers
Albania	1
Austria	4
Bangladesh	9
Cuba	4
Czech Republic	4
Denmark	4
Egypt	5
France	6
Germany	10
Greece	4
Hungary	5
Indonesia	5
Jordan	7
Pakistan	7
Poland	4
Republic of Korea	5
Russian Federation	3
Sweden	8
Switzerland	5
Turkey	5
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	8
United States of America	4
Uruguay	4
Total	121[a]

[a] The number of military observers may vary owing to rotations.



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